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SUBJECT: TESEV STUDY ON RELIGION AND POLITICS

¶1. Summary. On November 21, TESEV, a leading Turkish NGO, released the results of a recent survey on Islam and Politics. Some of the results were surprising, most notably the indication that the number of women wearing headscarves is declining despite a general belief to the contrary. A majority of those surveyed think that the military has a right to criticize the civilian government but also believe secularism can be protected without the military. According to the study, Turkish people do not view the headscarf issue as a priority although they increasingly self-identify as devout Muslims. The study also showed that there is very little support for sharia law in Turkey and that terrorist attacks in the name of Islam are unacceptable to a great majority. In his opening speech at the press conference TESEV President Dr. Can Paker said the urban, educated, well-off secular population and the rural, uneducated poor were converging due to urbanization and economic growth. End Summary.

¶2. The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) announced the findings of a recent survey on Islam and Politics in Turkey at a November 21 press conference attended by academics as well as representatives from diplomatic missions and some political parties. TESEV President Can Paker's presentation was followed by a cordial question and answer session, notably different from previous TESEV meetings on more controversial issues that erupted into fist fights.

Religion and Identity

¶3. According to survey results, 48.5% of Turkish people view themselves as "Islamists" whereas 20% see themselves as "secular." Also, the percentage of people who see themselves as "fairly religious" or "very religious" increased to 59% in 2006 from 31% in a similar TESEV survey conducted in 1999. The study also showed that those who define themselves first as "Muslims" increased from 35.7% in 1999 to 44.6% in 2006 while those who see themselves first as "Turks" dropped from 20.8% to 19.4%. Approximately 30% of the people define themselves first as "Turkish citizens." The emphasis on Islam as an identity is more common among Kurds with 57% self identifying as Muslims, while only 19.8% identify themselves as "Kurds" first. Islamic identity is lowest among Alevis with only 32.5% choosing Muslim as a primary self-identification.

Headscarf: Fewer in Numbers, But More Visible

¶4. The survey showed that the number of women covering their heads outside their homes went down from 72.5% in 1999 to 61.3% in 2006. However, 64% of the interviewees said they saw an increase in the number of covered women in daily life,

despite survey results showing fewer women veiling. 48.8% of all women said they used traditional head covering whereas 11.4% use the "turban," which is seen by secularists as a political style. Prof. Binnaz Toprak from Bogazici University noted in her presentation that the percentage of covered women decreased as income levels and education levels went up, and that most of the decline in headscarf use came from the younger generation, especially among those between 18 and 24 years.

15. When asked an open-ended question about the most important problems in Turkey, only 3.7% said the headscarf issue was a priority. Economic problems such as unemployment and low income levels top the list at 38% and 12% respectively, followed by terrorism and education. 71% think that university students should be allowed to wear headscarves as school, but 65% say they would allow their daughters to uncover their heads so that they could attend university if the current ban on headscarves in university classrooms were sustained.

Islam and Politics

16. Only 9% of the interviewees said they wanted a sharia state in Turkey, a significant decrease from 21% in 1999. 61.3% do not think that Islamic extremism is rising, and 73% do not think that secularism is under threat. Around 59% of the people think that the military should sometimes criticize the civilian government; however, nearly 53% think Turkey does not need the military's involvement to protect the secular nature of society. Poll results show that support for military involvement in politics is lower among Islamists and Kurds. Also, 74% think that the next president should be a devout Muslim, while 51% say it is important that the President's wife not wear a headscarf.

17. Survey results show that violence and terrorism on behalf of Islam is not acceptable. Only 20% of the people say they would approve suicide attacks against military targets if the country had been invaded (a worse case scenario). Support for suicide attacks against civilian targets is only 8%, also under the invasion scenario. Similarly, 83% disapprove of Israeli attacks against civilians in Palestine, while 73% disapprove of attacks on civilians in Iraq. 81% say such attacks are unacceptable in Islam.

Tolerance vs. Sectarianism

18. Despite some moderate results, the survey also reports increasing suspicion of those from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Those who think that people from other religions can be "good enough" went down from 89% in 1999 to 72% in 2006. 55% believe the Jews run the world economy. Also, 43% said they would not want a Greek couple as neighbors, while 66% would oppose a gay neighbor. 59% say missionary activities should be limited and only 26.6% approve of the reopening of the Halki Seminary. Prof. Ali Carkoglu said in his concluding remarks that sectarianism was more common among those who defined themselves as "Islamists."

19. Comment: The TESEV study results indicate a change in the understanding and definition of "religious conservatism" in Turkey. Although people identify themselves as personally more religious, support for extremism is declining. The results also show that people are more concerned about economic and standard of living issues than political issues such as headscarves at university. Confidence in the secular system is very high, and although the military is respected it is not viewed as a necessary protection against an erosion of secular values in society. However, a majority of people are increasingly suspicious of those with different religious or ethnic backgrounds and remain indifferent to the problems faced by minority groups. End Comment.

